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ABSTRACT

Defining civic education reform in the Czech Republic since 1989 in terms of its post-communist transition, this paper contends that the breadth, depth, and range of educational reforms proposed or already adopted in Central and Eastern European societies is extensive, involving most areas of education (curricula, educational legislation, management, new types of school and university institutions, and the system's overall structure, administration, and financing). The document includes explanations of Czech Republic education reforms from political, historical, and sociological perspectives: "Character of Our Educational Reform"; "'Anomie' and 'Crisis'"; "The Heritage of the Communist Regime"; "The Role of Pre-war Models and Traditions"; "The Influences of Political Doctrines"; "The Legislative Framework"; "The Role of Public Opinion and the Media"; "General Principles and Main Problems of Curriculum Reform"; and "Conclusions." After a seven-year transitional process that has opened up the education system to local and individual initiatives with relatively minor State involvement, the next phase of reform in the Czech Republic (and Central and Eastern Europe) requires collaborative discussions on the goals of education and curriculum content. (CB)

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CIVIC EDUCATION REFORM IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSITION

Paper prepared for an international conference „ Individualism and Community in a Democratic Society" organised by the Center for Civic Education and the Federal Center for Political Education of the Federal Republic of Germany, Washington, D.C. October 6-11,1996

Jaroslav K A L O U S

Character of Our Educational Reform

In comparison with the context in which most education reforms take place, the present reform process in the Czech Republic and in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) generally, has two very unusual aspects. Firstly, the breadth, range, and depth of the education reforms proposed or already adopted is extraordinarily large; they concern almost all levels and sectors of education: the structure of the system as a whole, curricula, educational legislation, management, the administration and financing of the system and of its schools, the creation of institutions (schools, universities) of a completely new type not corresponding to any past national tradition, etc. The two precedents of such a global education reform process, namely the Russian revolution of 1917 and the post-1945 take-overs of power by communist regimes in different CEE countries, are not really comparable. On these occasions, reforms could be, and were, imposed from above. They were under single, central and more or less total control. The context today in CEE is, or at least aims to be, democratic and therefore pluralistic, opening space for many autonomous forces. This, obviously, is a highly desirable and positive phenomenon but it also means that the reform process in CEE, as in any democratic country, is much more complex and much less easily controlled.

Secondly, the speed of the reform process is also quite exceptional. Contrary to general experience that educational reform, even with regard to their formulation stage, almost always require a relatively long time - often several years - education reforms in CEE have been designed, adopted and launched, especially during the first 2 years of the transition period (which, obviously, does not mean that were fully implemented during these short periods).

This process is, of course, not isolated from the overall transition process. To a large extent, the globality and speed of education reforms have their roots in the general climate of rapid and radical change which CEE societies are undergoing: their transition to a market economy, to a pluralist democracy, decentralisation and so on. Thus, education reform is not only paralleled, but largely motivated and triggered by reforms in other sectors and by the general liberalisation of the system. The main education reform goals in the Czech Republic - and the same is probably true of other CEE countries - were closely linked to, and arose from the principal objectives of the political and economic liberalisation and the quasi revolutionary global change of the system.

„Anomie" and „Crisis"

The transition situation, i.e. the sudden passage from a totalitarian and closed

system to a pluralistic open and democratic one, generates factors which make education reforms difficult and indeed might block or distort the reform process. The Durkheims concept of "anomie" is being used to describe this situation. It is a state in which individuals find themselves when the social rules guiding their existence lose their force, becoming mutually incompatible or, under the impact of certain social changes, have to be replaced by others. When this change occurs too abruptly without immediately being replaced by another, a moral vacuum is being created.

There is a number of causes of anomie in the case of post-communist transition:

- the elimination of the overall regulator (the Party State and its apparatus), without it being replaced by a self-regulating mechanism;
- the destruction of the social pact with the Welfare State which, in return for political and civil loyalty, ensured minimum living to every individual. Without the protective paternalism of the all-powerful State, the individual feels left alone and faced with an uncertain future;
- the absence of plausible alternatives and, worse, the frequent prevalence of distrust towards the new order and its institutions. As the gap between expectations and realities, and between official rhetoric and immediate observations widens, so the degree of anomie disorganisation of post-totalitarian society increases;
- the paradoxical coexistence of old and new structures without re-assimilating the rules of self-regulation by competition. The individual has assimilated the new rhetoric of liberalism, but he prefers to stay with the old kinds of social relations; he wants freedom but knows nothing about the new democratic institutions: he aspires to capitalist prosperity, but he does not want to give up the superficial style of work characteristic to socialism.

On the other hand, transition means also something else. It is what the ancient Greeks called a situation of "crisis", a decisive state of reappraisal, a moment of reflection, doubt and retrospective assessment. While „anomie" is an attitude of disenchantment and affective insecurity, "crisis" is the mobilisation of individual and collective consciousness to overcome the uneasiness of moral life, a form of social mobilisation in support of a new collective project.

This new individual and collective consciousness (concerning the value, role and desirable aspects of education) is probably at the root of what might be considered a third and most important characteristic of the education reform process in the Czech Republic, namely its spontaneous and bottom-up unfolding. The educational change, to the extent that it takes place, is due to individual and local initiatives, much less, and sometimes very little, to government steering. The government has, of course, created, principally by new legislation (authorising private schools, allowing free choice of schools, etc.), the main conditions for this to happen but it has not, or only to a very limited extent, had any control over the whole process nor has it set any specific goals.

There is an important counterpart to this bottom-up process of change: resistance to change and reform, due to the inertia of old habits, to a lack of experience how to handle the new situation (e.g., school autonomy) and/or to a lack of incentives (e.g. of fiscal nature) are extremely difficult to overcome. Moreover, on certain occasions, the spontaneity of development, however desirable it is in many

respects, might lead to chaotic and quasi anarchic situations with less desirable consequences.

In the following part will shall concentrate more deeply on description how the above mention situation influence the change of schools.

The Heritage of the Communist Regime

In a sense, this factor can be considered as the most important one in explaining the difficulties of reforms in the Czech Republic - as well as in other CEE countries. A whole range of aspects of this heritage can be identified, most of them of a sociological nature and falling under the heading of inertia of acquired attitudes and behaviour patterns. More specifically, we can speak of work habits current in the old system, of the deeply rooted practice of acting only according to detailed instructions "from above" (e.g., following centrally prescribed curricula), of outdated teaching methods and contents (e.g., authoritarian and encyclopaedic), and the like.

If many schools don't yet assume fully their new autonomy, if teaching contents and methods remain often encyclopaedic and authoritarian, if the internal school climate has not changed sufficiently, and sometimes not at all, if many parents do not yet participate as they should or could in the life of the school - all these and many other non-attainments (or very partial attainments) of the general reform goals can be explained by this factor, whereby it is difficult to distinguish what is due to the inertia of acquired habits and attitudes and what is simply due to a lack of experience, knowledge and skills for handling the new situations.

The explanation of the reform difficulties by the heritage factor can, and often does, represent an oversimplification if not an excuse for a lack of action. Moreover, the impact of this factor is extremely difficult to measure. There are no data and no surveys which would enable one to evaluate the percentage of schools, teachers, parents, etc., who have changed their attitudes and behaviour and those who have not. In general, it is estimated that the former - the innovating sector - are only a small minority, maybe 15 to 20 %, which would mean that in 80 to 85 % of cases linked to some of the essential aspects of educational developments such as curriculum or teaching methods, the system has not yet really changed. (However, there are no real confirmation of those figures.)

On the other hand, it has to be recognised that sociological forces and resistances such as those linked to the heritage factor require almost by definition a long time to be attenuated and that they can lose their impact only very gradually. Even if the figures of 15-20% as an assessment of the size of the innovative minority are correct (or are, possibly, lower still), this might not be viewed as a bad performance in a more historical perspective, especially considering that less than 7 years have elapsed since the breakdown of a totalitarian regime which lasted almost 2 generations.

The Role of Pre-war Models and Traditions

Education, probably more than any other social sector or subsystem, is deeply rooted in the Czech Republic, as anywhere else, in national history and traditions. These traditions were radically abandoned following the communist take - over and a new foreign model imposed. A certain return to the pre-communist and particularly pre-war situation was to some extent an inevitable and normal development. In that

sense we might even speak of a restoration rather than a revolution which has accompanied the end of the communist regime.

In the case of Czech education, this restoration implies a twofold problem. On the one hand, it has occasionally led to a rejection of any external influences, however appropriate or profitable they might be, and thus to an opposition to reforms deemed, rightly or wrongly, to be externally inspired. On the other hand, a strong emphasis on national traditions often means disregard or even rejection of trends and developments which education systems of advanced democratic countries have been necessarily undergoing since the war: the search for equality of opportunity, different forms of diversification, postponement of the differentiation between general and vocational education, closer functional links between education and society, etc.

In a sense "the restoration trend" is also a consequence of one of the earlier mentioned transition anomies: the old system and its regulating mechanisms have been destroyed: one of the easiest ways to fill the vacuum not yet filled by new self-regulating mechanisms is to search in the past, to look for old securities in the face of an uncertain future.

Influence of Political Doctrines

All the main features of the transformation of education in the Czech Republic corresponded to the general principles of the country's liberalisation: return to democracy and market economy, development of a pluralist system, deregulation, decentralisation, etc. Within these principles, the concept of market economy plays a key role and as such influences decisively the development of education. Certain reforms cannot be launched at all or are very difficult to implement if they are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as contrary to this concept - for example, a reform proposing a new co-ordinating role of the State in education. The extent to which this attitude can be assimilated with, or is part of, the notion of liberalism is another matter but the interpretation of this notion can in the Czech Republic go very far by considering education primarily, if not exclusively, as a consumption and as a "private good", in no way determined by interest of society as a whole.

In reality, of course, even such radical, liberal views coexist with historical traditions and one of them, even from the pre-communist period, is, as already noted, a heavy dose of centralisation of the education system. Thus, education reforms in the Czech Republic have to accommodate a mix of quasi contradictory "ideological" and historical forces which, undoubtedly, complicates their design and implementation.

The Legislative Framework

The Czech Republic, similarly to Austria and some other Central European countries, and in total contrast to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, is very legalistic. In a sense, only what exists through or is backed by law can exist at all. Hence the crucial importance of the legislative framework for almost any important education reform. At the same time, any gaps in legislation often make reforms and change impossible.

On the other hand, education legislation in the Czech Republic is often incredibly detailed, entering into small procedural items (forms to be filled, dates to be observed etc.) which has negative effects on the flexibility of the implementation process and may even lead to conflicts with one of the main goals of education reform - the development of school and institutional autonomy.

The Role of Public Opinion and the Media

It is generally true that interest in matters concerning the development of education and schooling expressed by public opinion is by itself only rarely a decisive factor of the reform process. However, it can be supposed with certainty that a low level of interest almost automatically means a lower pressure on the government and legislators to make education a priority in the programmes of their activity. It seems that, at least to a certain degree, this also applies to the Czech Republic.

According to yearly polls of the Institute for Public Opinion, education is not placed high on the list of problems considered very urgent by citizens. In a list of 16 areas of possible interest, it occupies 11th or 12th place. Problems such as crime, corruption, social security, health care, the environment and economic reforms preceded it on the scale.

A close relationship certainly exists between the interest of the public in schooling and education and the attention which is devoted to it in the press and other media. Here, again, the situation in the Czech Republic is not favourable. There is nothing here which could be compared with the British Times Education Supplement or the French Le Monde d'Education. It is true that three or four specialised weeklies or monthlies exist, which however are destined for a limited circle of readers (mainly the teaching and academic community). Dailies devote to education only short and feature articles, reacting mainly to "hot events" (e.g., strike threats of teachers, the discussion of a new law, etc.), rarely longer and more fundamental analytical articles. None of the newspapers has a regular (weekly or monthly) rubric devoted to problems of education, whereas economic, financial and cultural (arts, theatre, films and literary) life is almost daily the subject of special pages or even entire sections.

It is indeed possible to believe that this relatively low emphasis of the Czech media on problems of education, just like the low judgement of its importance by public opinion, is in a certain sense normal and corresponds to the first and also the current phase of the transition period. In both of these phases, the public and equally the media - whether rightly or wrongly - have been disturbed by other problems than education.

General Principles and Main Problems of Curriculum Reform

Decisions about the goals and content of teaching, how subjects should be managed and how the activities of the teachers and pupils should be organised were traditionally consigned to the central State body - the Ministry of Education. The basic curricular documents set down the obligatory composition of subjects appropriate to the sector of education or the type of school, their place in the school years and a timetable specifying their instruction on a weekly basis. Directly linked to the curriculum were the syllabuses, setting down the course of study, and instructions for teaching the individual subjects in each school year. Schools and teachers regarded themselves, in this tradition, as merely the executors of the centre's decisions.

Parallel to the conceptual and structural changes in the education system, changes have also taken place since 1990 in the understanding, processing and implementation of the curricular documents. In some cases curricular changes have been the first phase in the transformation process and in others they have arisen as the result of new schools and areas of study being established. The determining factor was

the constitution of a democratic plural political system, upholding human and civil rights and the free circulation of information, ideas and values. Behind the curricular reforms were the spontaneous initiatives of pedagogical activists and their associations, recommendations of alternative pedagogical movements and declared intentions of the State education policy. Both innovations from abroad, as well as renewed domestic pedagogical pre-war traditions were applied. An important step towards relaxing rules on curricula was the decision of the Ministry to give all State school directors the right to:

- adjust the curriculum to an extent of 10% of the credit hours;
- adjust the content of the teaching syllabuses of individual subjects to an extent of 30% of credit hours, either by a change in proportions or by the addition or the omission of subjects taught;
- create their own educational programme, which, however, must be approved the Ministry of Education.

The following principles were declared:

- democratisation and humanisation of curricula;
- pluralisation and diversification of the curricula;
- moving away from directive curricula towards a participatory concept.

Along with the liberalisation of the education system, diversification of the types of school (state and private), and the increase in the pedagogical autonomy of schools and teachers, the question has arisen, by what means can one ensure objectively the desired quality of education, the transferability between educational paths, and the comparability of the achieved results. The best solution is considered to be the formulation of educational standards, whose functioning should also reflect a new approach to the responsibility of the State in education.

Until now there have, however, been no noticeable results in this area. Opinions are divided, even conflicting (whether to set targets or to evaluate; whether to have global aims or to define a precise, limited set of subjects - a core curriculum; how to understand the relationship to curricular documents; the application of standards in schools and in the school inspection etc.).

Curricular reform plans, which in many respects are still unclear and raw, are entering unevenly into actual pedagogical practice and meeting with many obstacles and problems. These are manifesting themselves in a variety of ways, at each stage and type of education. In general, the following problems should be mentioned:

- Curricular traditionalism: fragmented understanding of different elements of the curricula (goals, content, processes, evaluation, aids); reliance on the central model and an unwillingness to take risks and to assume individual responsibility; an atomistic concept of the fields of study; concentration on the cognitive aspect of the teaching process and lack of ability to link it with the acquisition of skills, competence and practice; a preference for traditional teacher-pupil relations;
- Curricular voluntarism: a tendency to underestimate the importance of the central aims of the education system, its essential values and long-term perspectives. Concentration on own specific problems and their isolated solution, the results of which may threaten the overall coherence of the education system;

- Over-estimation of the formal aspects of curricular reform at the expense of their internal contents (liberalisation of the curricula, syllabuses and use of teaching aids without sufficient regard to the necessary modernisation and restructuring of the actual education content).

Conclusions

In its initial phase freedom sometimes takes form of a chaos. People are focusing on social interactions, relations, allocation of power. The short-time problems are so enormous that many people forget to take care of the structural long-time problems. People are eager to act, there is hardly any time or capacity for a true conceptual discussions.

During the years 1989 until now, an overall spontaneous and perhaps necessary development took place (also as a radical reaction to the former regime): the relaxing, opening and liberalising of the education system, leaving as much room as possible to local and individual initiatives, the relatively minor involvement of the State or even its absence.

It was and is possible to consider this development as truly necessary not only from the viewpoint of the predominant liberal politics and stress on free market values, but additionally, if not primarily, from a certain historical viewpoint. After more than 40 years of rigid centralism and State regulation of all aspects of social and economic development, it was more than desirable to foster a situation allowing for a reverse in acquired habits and behaviours, which implied acting only on the orders "from above", in short a situation leading to the fostering of individual responsibility. The generally uninhibited and undirected development of the education system was to a large extent a condition and possibly the only instrument for contributing to this (as yet incomplete) sociological reversal in a decisive manner.

After seven years of transitional process the situation has changed. The time is coming for society to get together and start serious discussions about the goals of education and contents of curriculum also in Czech Republic and other CEE countries.